

THE DAYS AFTER A DEAL WITH IRAN

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIR FORCE

Lynn E. Davis and David E. Thaler

This analysis begins by positing that a final nuclear agreement is reached between Iran and the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany (P5+1). (See the box on p. 2 for the assumed contours of an agreement.) One of a series of RAND reports on what the Middle East and U.S. policy might look like in “the days after a deal,” this Perspective examines the implications of a potential deal for the U.S. military

posture and activities in the Middle East, with a focus on the U.S. Air Force (USAF).¹

In the design of U.S. policies in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement, the United States will have many different instruments available, including diplomacy, political interactions, and economic incentives and disincentives. U.S. military posture and activities in the Middle East will also have a role to play in support of any

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agreement's implementation. For example, enhancing the USAF rotational presence in the region could signal to Iran the consequences of noncompliance, while also reassuring U.S. partners anxious about Iran's remaining nuclear infrastructure and its broader regional political and military activities. Alternatively, the United States could reduce its overt military threats against Iran to signal to Iran that it will reap benefits from complying with an agreement.

Because policymakers will face a complex set of trade-offs in the design of U.S. military posture and activities in the region, now is the time to consider possible implications of a nuclear deal for the USAF that is already strained by budget pressures and an array of global commitments.

The high-level policy decisions on this issue will be made at the national level, but the USAF has a critical role to play in informing senior-level policy discussions as to how the USAF military posture and activities in the region could be designed in support of alternative U.S. policies toward Iran and in assessing the implications of these alternatives for the readiness of its forces.

It is important to clarify at the outset that U.S. military posture in the region serves a variety of U.S. interests beyond those narrowly related to the Iranian nuclear issue.² As in the past, it will be driven by the need to counter broader Iranian conventional and subversive challenges, contain Syrian spillover, deter aggression against key regional partners—including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Jordan—and wind down operations in Afghanistan. Responding to the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) has added a new dimension to the demands for U.S. military forces in the region. The forms and intensity of the campaign over time—including the level of partner participa-

Assumptions About the Contours of a Final Deal*

For the purposes of analysis, the authors presume that if a final deal is reached between the P5+1 and Iran, it will be based on these general principles:

- Iran may continue to enrich uranium, but limits are placed on the degree of enrichment, and on the number and types of centrifuges used.
- Iran redesigns its Arak heavy water reactor to produce less plutonium in its spent fuel.
- Iran allows intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection of nuclear sites; Iran agrees to sign and ratify the Additional Protocol to its safeguard agreements, permitting IAEA access to nondeclared sites with little notification.
- Iran shares information with IAEA on possible military dimensions of the program.
- The United States and its partners phase out nuclear-related sanctions as agreement is implemented.

* These principles are derived from the elements for a comprehensive solution found in the Joint Plan of Action signed by Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva on November 24, 2013. We are not predicting what the actual agreement will look like, but using these plausible contours as a point of departure for our analysis.

tion—could, however, vary considerably, introducing significant uncertainties.

What this means is that U.S. policies in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement with Iran cannot be divorced from any of these other demands. At the same time, the nuclear agreement will be a factor in the design of the overall U.S. military posture, and our intent is to provide the Air Force with a framework for thinking about its possible implications.

For many reasons, policymakers will be attracted to a cautious “wait and see” approach in the days after a nuclear agreement. This will likely pertain to U.S. policies overall, but especially to U.S. military posture in the region. The rationale for such an approach lies in the uncertainties over Iranian intentions to comply with the agreement, the potential for change in the nature and priorities of the Iranian leadership, and future Iranian behavior in the region.³ A “wait and see” approach is also made more attractive by the fact that the U.S. military posture in the region advances a number of broader objectives—such as degrading ISIL and reassuring partners—that would work against reductions narrowly based on a nuclear agreement. Finally, the historical legacy of other adversaries cheating on agreements will understandably predispose policymakers to such an approach. The implications for the USAF and the other services of a “wait and see” stance would suggest no reduction or change in their current posture—and, if anything, a possible increase in activities in the region to reassure U.S. partners.

In short, a nuclear agreement with Iran is not likely to bring a near-term “windfall” in diminished military operational requirements that could relieve pressure on USAF readiness and budget.

A nuclear agreement will, however, call for military planners to consider how potential military missions could affect its imple-

mentation. So, this analysis begins by describing how future Central Command (CENTCOM) missions will require innovative thinking about deterrence and escalation toward Iran in ways similar to those that helped shape the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship.

Over time, Iranian behavior in complying with the nuclear agreement and/or its regional behavior could lead U.S. policymakers to change their “wait and see” approach, which, in turn, could call for changes in U.S. military posture and activities. This could also happen as a result of demands for U.S. military forces in other regions. We conclude by describing and analyzing potential pathways to change and illustrating what these might mean for the USAF posture and activities in the region. We understand that any actual decisions regarding the USAF posture and activities would need to take into account the contribution of the other services and the possibility of trade-offs.

USAF Posture in the Middle East

The U.S. military continues to maintain a robust presence in the Gulf region. U.S. military posture there, including its presence and security cooperation with partners, has been designed with a focus on a multifaceted Iranian threat. The overall objectives are to:

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The United States also must continue to balance prioritization of deterring and responding to threats emanating from the CENTCOM region with the need to deter and respond to threats emanating from other regions.

- deter Iranian aggression against U.S. interests (including ensuring a stable and predictable flow of oil)
- counter terrorism from the Iranian threat network (namely, Iran's operational, material, and financial support of Hezbollah and other allies), as well as from Sunni extremist groups
- maintain security commitments to partners in the region.

These underlying objectives will not change with a nuclear agreement. Maintaining access to energy, ensuring partner security, and countering terrorism are enduring interests above and beyond negotiating a solution to the Iranian nuclear threat. An agreement is also unlikely to change the primary trade-offs that policymakers will face. The United States will continue to balance the need to bring military power to bear in meeting regional threats with the need to accommodate political sensitivities of U.S. partners that, on the one hand, desire the deterrence gained from U.S. forward presence but, on the other, are anxious about that presence undermining their domestic legitimacy. The United States also must continue to balance prioritization of deterring and responding to threats emanating from the CENTCOM region with the need to deter and respond to threats emanating from other regions, the Asia Pacific region providing the strongest competing demand for forces allocated to CENTCOM.

What follows is a brief description of the broad categories and status of the USAF posture in the region, which serves as a baseline for considering possible changes depending on the evolution of U.S. policies.⁴

Permanent Presence/Infrastructure/Basing: The USAF's permanent presence in the region is relatively small, consisting of some 500 personnel located mainly in the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at al-Udeid in Qatar, the Gulf Air Warfare Center (GAWC) at al-Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and country teams in embassies around the region. Apart from al-Udeid, the other two main operating locations for the USAF are Ali al-Salem in Kuwait and al-Dhafra. These locations have extensive capacity to support major air operations, including runways/taxiways/maximum on ground, fuel, shelters (some hardened), and munitions storage, as well as maintenance and logistics capability. The USAF prepositions considerable amounts of war reserve materiel (WRM) in Qatar and Oman. The United States and USAF retain contingency access in Oman.

Rotational Presence: Of the approximately 13,500 USAF personnel in the Middle East, some 13,000 are there on a rotational basis, and primarily in the Gulf region.⁵ The same is true for U.S. aircraft in the region. The USAF, under Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT), has three air expeditionary wings (AEWs) and one expeditionary mobility squadron deployed to the region, including bombers, fighters (among these, the F-22), tankers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft (manned and unmanned), special operations aircraft, and support aircraft. There are also six F-16s in Jordan on a temporary basis.

Security Cooperation and Exercises: Countering Iran is a shared interest among the United States, Israel, and the GCC coun-

tries. As such, U.S. security cooperation with those regional partners emphasizes building capabilities that aid those partners in deterring and defeating Iranian aggression, including by improving the interoperability of partner militaries with U.S. forces. The United States maintains a very robust security cooperation effort with partners in the Middle East. Israel, Egypt, and Jordan are consistently among the largest recipients of U.S. foreign military financing (FMF) globally. Israel, the largest FMF recipient, is benefiting from a ten-year, \$30 billion commitment. The United States continues to equip and train Iraqi Security Forces as well, and has increased its support to counter ISIL advances.

In addition to these large FMF outlays, the USAF is involved in billions of dollars of Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to cash customers such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. A particular focus of partner acquisitions is advanced fighters, munitions, Command, Control, Communications, Computers, & Intelligence (C4I), and support items. Since 2007, the GCC has bought \$75 billion in advanced U.S. arms. This includes a \$29 billion sale at the end of 2011 of 84 F-15SAs, aircraft upgrades, and air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles to Saudi Arabia, as well as multiple contracts for construction, sustainment, C4I, and other support to the Kingdom. For its part, the UAE has purchased billions of dollars of advanced F-16 Block 60 fighters, as well as C-17 and C-130 airlifters.

The vast majority of U.S. training of GCC personnel, particularly in the cases of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is technical training (such as pilot and maintainer training) related to the sales of equipment. Additionally, the USAF is involved in hundreds of military-to-military events in the region annually, including conferences and seminars, subject matter expert exchanges, key leader engagements (such as the Air Chiefs Conference), and operator engagement talks,

as well as multiple training and interoperability exercises. In keeping with partner preferences, most of the interactions remain bilateral, but annual multilateral exercises are also held, most notably Eagle Resolve in the Persian Gulf and Eager Lion in Jordan.

Operational exercises focus on early warning, air and missile defense, and logistics. Other multilateral efforts are dedicated to counterpiracy, counterterrorism, and consequence management. Pilots from Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have participated in Red Flag exercises at Nellis Air Force Base that are considered part of the United States' premier air combat training. Moreover, the USAF is involved through AFCENT in operating and training with the UAE and others at the GAWC and the Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center (IAMDC) at al-Bateen. The GAWC offers courses in advanced tactical leadership, joint terminal attack control, and other skills to Emiratis as well as Saudis, Qataris, Jordanians, and other partners.⁶ Familiarization events are conducted for GCC participants at the IAMDC to share ballistic-missile defense information. Both the GAWC and the IAMDC are run jointly by the United States and UAE.

Planning/Missions/Operations: The U.S. Air Force prepares to project decisive air and space power for potential crises and conflicts with Iran. The central concern for the United States is Iran's capability and periodic threats to inhibit access to Gulf oil and gas that passes through the Strait of Hormuz to reach global markets.⁷ Deterring and, if necessary, defeating an Iranian effort to close the Strait would involve airpower to defeat Iranian air defenses, gain air superiority, and strike a wide range of targets deep inside Iran.

Over the past decade, the USAF responded to mounting concerns over Iran's nuclear infrastructure—which includes hardened and deeply buried facilities—with options for countering it. USAF assets

In the aftermath of a nuclear agreement with Iran, military planners will need to consider how potential missions could affect the implementation of the nuclear agreement.

are a component of a credible U.S. threat to degrade that infrastructure, both to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons and to persuade Israel not to undertake a unilateral strike against Iran, which would have uncertain success and would risk regional escalation. To these ends, USAF ISR aircraft gather information on the disposition of Iranian forces and other strategic Iranian assets. The USAF conducts sorties with combat aircraft near Iranian airspace to demonstrate to Iran that the United States has the ability to inflict damage on Iran from the air if called on to do so.⁸ The USAF also prepares for other support operations, including aerial refueling, strategic and tactical airlift, search and rescue, and MEDEVAC.

Post-Agreement Military Planning

In the aftermath of a nuclear agreement with Iran, military planners will need to consider how potential missions could affect the implementation of the nuclear agreement—not only those that are directed at Iran’s nuclear program but also those focused on other threats posed by Iran and those that are not focused on Iran but could encourage cooperation in other areas. From a CENTCOM planner’s perspective, we can divide the range of missions for a post-agreement world into different tiers as they relate directly and indirectly to the

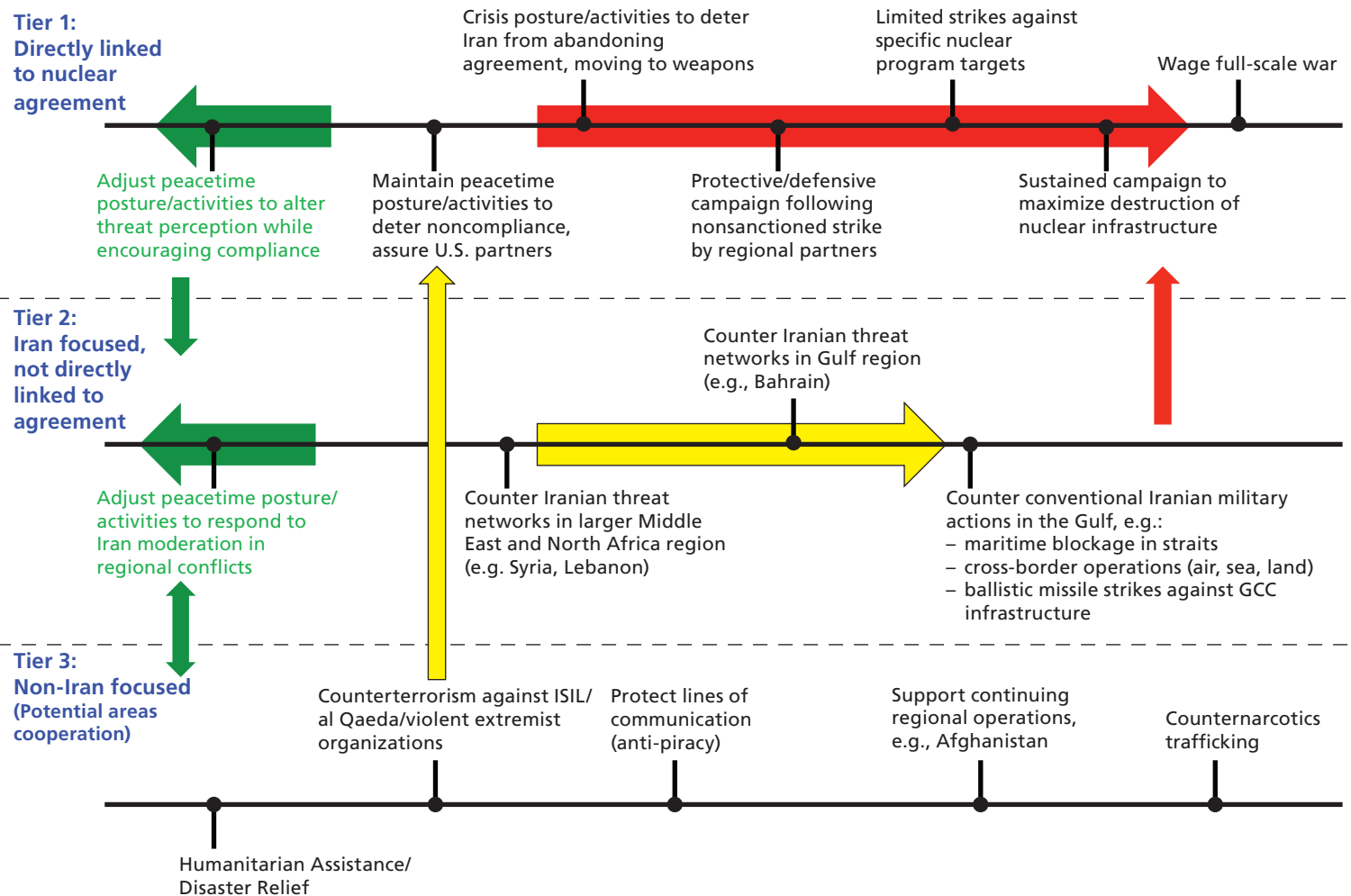
nuclear agreement (see Figure 1).^{*} The missions shown in each tier are intended to be illustrative and not exhaustive.

Tier 1 focuses only on those missions directly related to Iran’s nuclear capabilities. The left side of the continuum includes relatively innocuous activities, such as maintaining a peacetime posture, that are unlikely to undermine a nuclear agreement. Rather, these activities signal to Iran that a curtailment of its nuclear program will be reciprocated and could involve a reduction in its vulnerability to U.S. military action. As depicted by the vertical green arrow, some of these activities could help contribute to cooperation on other regional security issues, which are displayed in Tier 2. Moving to the right on the Tier 1 continuum introduces activities that would challenge the durability of a nuclear agreement, in that they increasingly threaten Iranian regime survival. These activities may be prompted by Iranian actions (e.g., noncompliance) or disagreement over whether the terms of the agreement were being met, partner action (e.g., an uncoordinated strike on Iranian nuclear infrastructure), inadvertent escalation (e.g., a misreading of the other’s signals by the United States or Iran) or, *in extremis*, a U.S. policy decision that the benefits of a confrontation with Iran outweigh the risks of undermining the nuclear agreement.

The basic tension in Tier 1 is between the need to make clear to Iran the potential costs of failing to comply with the nuclear agreement and showing Iran the potential rewards of compliance. Further, this delicate balance must be reached in the shadow of partners that will require their own reassurances and possess their own capabilities to confront Iran militarily.

^{*} Thanks to our RAND colleague Bruce Nardulli, who offered this idea to describe CENTCOM’s military missions in terms of the three tiers, and for suggesting the analogy to U.S. interactions with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Figure 1: U.S. CENTCOM Missions in Post-Agreement World: Tiers and Tensions



NOTE: Colored arrows denote the effect of types of missions on nuclear agreement.

Tier 2 depicts the continuum of military activities that, while not directly linked to Iran's nuclear program and the nuclear agreement, are focused on the Iranian threat. These are the activities that are designed to blunt both Iran's regional ambitions and the destabilizing actions undertaken by Iran's nonstate allies, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and an array of Iraqi Shia militants. Just as in the Tier 1 activities, the left side of the continuum is less escalatory while the right side is more so. There could also be interplay between Tier 1 and Tier 2 activities, in the sense that the latter could influence Iran's commitment to uphold its end of a nuclear agreement.

Not surprisingly, actions that are more escalatory in Tier 2 are also more threatening to a nuclear agreement (depicted by the vertical red arrow), while the less-escalatory activities could reinforce the agreement, as well as expand the space for tacit U.S.-Iranian cooperation on other issues—such as efforts to counter Sunni extremists in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria (depicted by the vertical green arrow between Tiers 2 and 3).

Tier 3 refers to a spectrum of activities that take place within the CENTCOM region that are not focused on Iran. The campaign against ISIL falls in this tier. There are some common interests between the United States and Iran in countering ISIL, although there are reasons why actual cooperation may not occur. Other types of missions include counterterrorism, support to regional operations (e.g., Afghanistan), humanitarian assistance, and counterpiracy. These activities could have positive spillover on the nuclear agreement, and might build momentum for cooperation on other issues of mutual concern.

Given the uncertainties regarding what is happening with respect to ISIL in Tier 3, it is difficult to describe how it will affect the other tiers—although, as the figure shows, it could offer a path

to expanding cooperation with Iran in other areas, not only in Tier 3 but also potentially in Tier 2. For example, a cooperative involvement of Iran against ISIL and its rollback could be a bridge to discussions on how to moderate Iranian support for activities in Iraq and Syria that are viewed as destabilizing by others. At the same time, a robust U.S. military presence against ISIL could be viewed by Iran as increasing its own vulnerabilities and moving to the right on the Tier 1 continuum. This uncertainty is depicted in Figure 1 by the yellow arrow extending from “CT against ISIL...” in Tier 3 to Tier 1.

By examining these tiers, one can see how missions/activities can place the nuclear agreement at risk—or, alternatively, strengthen it—both within a given tier (horizontal arrows) and between tiers (vertical arrows). In a post-agreement world, U.S. military activities designed to counter Iranian regional ambitions (Tier 2), and even military actions against non-Iranian threats (Tier 3), will have linkages to the nuclear agreement. As U.S. policies evolve in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement, these tiers and their interlocking tensions will need to be managed.

To the extent that preserving the nuclear agreement is a high priority and the United States develops greater confidence in Iranian compliance, policymakers and military planners will need to consider adapting activities to align with the left side of the continua. The most-important adjustments will be to Tier 1 activities because these relate directly to the Iranian nuclear file. As for Tier 2, a U.S. move to the left will depend on policymakers' judgment whether Iran will view the Tier 2 activities differently from Tier 1 activities or lump them together. If Iran is judged to be open to separation, the United States would do well not to ratchet back Tier 2 activities in the hope of a positive spillover

on Iranian compliance with a nuclear agreement. Alternatively, if Iran is unwilling to separate, or incapable of it, the United States will need to be aware that Tier 2 activities may risk undermining Iran's commitment to a nuclear deal. In this case, for example, a U.S. (or even Israeli) effort to counter Hezbollah in Syria could drive Iran to warn that it may consider options for violating the nuclear agreement.

At the same time, the United States will want to avoid a situation in which concerns over preserving the agreement act as a major impediment to taking military action designed to advance other strategic interests. In an ideal world, activities on the left side of the Tier 2 continuum would reinforce Iranian compliance with a nuclear agreement, while activities on the right side would not undermine the agreement. In other words, the United States could get positive spillover from Tier 2 but not be held hostage by potential negative spillover. This type of arrangement may not be possible to achieve, although the United States should pursue activities in Tier 2 with this aim.

An admittedly loose analogy is how the United States thought about containing and even engaging in limited conflict against the Soviet Union while avoiding escalation to strategic nuclear exchanges. This required creative thinking about deterrence, flexible options, signaling, and escalation control. While the case of Iran differs from the Soviet case in terms of scale, U.S. risk of escalation—and resulting constraints, noncompliance, and nullification of the nuclear agreement—are thresholds of concern. But as with the Soviet case, the challenge will be to design flexible options, signal intent and limitations of military actions, and consider restrictions on certain classes of targets to avoid escalation. These ideas would need to be grafted onto the new context of Iran as a continu-

ing “adversary,” but with the potential for change in its relationship with the United States in the days after a nuclear agreement.

Pathways to Changes in USAF Posture

Policymakers in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement will likely be attracted to a “wait and see” approach that would focus on hedging against Iran's noncompliance and reassurance of partners. U.S. activities and presence in the region may even expand somewhat to reassure partners who are reluctant to trust a deal with Iran and could seek ways to scuttle a deal by acting independently—such as Israel conducting a strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

The USAF in this approach would not take off the table nuclear-related military activities, such as preparations for a military strike, to enforce compliance and prevent a unilateral Israeli attack. U.S. military activities would continue to focus on countering Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles. At the same time, the campaign against ISIL will require the use of USAF military assets in the region, and there will remain a need to continue monitoring and countering Iranian threat networks in the Gulf (including Iraq) and in Syria/Lebanon, as well as expanding operations against ISIL and other terrorist threats. The missions in the three tiers described in Figure 1 would continue as they stand today. After

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U.S. policymakers may see Iran's behavior as reason for policy changes (e.g., Iran's successful implementation of the nuclear agreement, moderation in its actions in the region and toward the United States).

a deal, the USAF could bolster some of its activities in the region to reassure allies: through increased information-sharing, sales of more advanced weapon systems, prepositioning additional munitions, and expanded BMD cooperation and joint exercises with Israel and Arab partner states.

While a “wait and see” approach in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement is the likely starting point, U.S. policymakers may see Iran's behavior as reason for policy changes (e.g., Iran's successful implementation of the nuclear agreement, moderation in its actions in the region and toward the United States). Changes could also come about for reasons external to what is happening in the Middle East; i.e., the need to respond to military priorities elsewhere in the world, or to domestic pressure to reduce defense spending. So, there are potential pathways to change in U.S. policies in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement, and it is these that we describe.

Such policy changes would be fairly straightforward in leading to reductions in the USAF posture and activities in the region, were it not for the demands that have arisen in the ISIL campaign. The problem for policymakers is that it is very difficult to predict those demands, for they will be a function not only of how the ISIL threat evolves but also what contributions the coalition partners are able

and willing to make. While the campaign could be long-term, what it will actually require on the part of the United States is unknown.

It is clear that decisions on the future USAF posture and activities in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement will need to factor in what will be required to respond to the ISIL threat and to address the potential trade-offs. Addressing these ISIL-based issues exceeds the scope of this report, but we believe we do help provide a framework for planners to consider ISIL demands in the context of other potential changes resulting from a nuclear agreement.

For each of the pathways, we describe the main considerations that could lead policymakers to change U.S. policies and start down a pathway. We then illustrate what changes might occur in USAF posture and activities in the region. Table 1 describes current USAF military activities maintained under a “wait and see” approach, and the changes that could be associated with each of the pathways. Again, it is important to recognize that for actual decisions to be taken, policymakers will need to factor in the capabilities of the other services and how these same capabilities serve a variety of U.S. interests.⁹ The pathways are not dependent upon any specific timeframe for their implementation.

Underlying each of the pathways is the assumption that Iran would continue to comply with the nuclear agreement. If the agreement breaks down, the likely U.S. response would be for USAF assets to return to the region and prepare for missions in Tier 1 in Figure 1. Given that a reintroduction of forces could be under possible crisis conditions, policymakers (and the USAF) would face the challenge of not allowing the confrontation with Iran to lead to unintended instabilities and even conflict. Another potential challenge could be that partners in the Gulf could be resistant to allowing the forces back for fear that these forces could be used in attacks against Iran.

Pathway 1: Assuage Iranian Sense of Vulnerability

One pathway to change in U.S. policies toward Iran could arise as a result of how Iran is implementing the nuclear agreement. After a period of time in which Iran has complied with the nuclear agreement and, through its transparency with the IAEA, has increased confidence in its willingness to forgo nuclear weapons, U.S. policymakers could decide to explore assuaging Iran's sense of vulnerability as a way to further reinforce Iran's commitments to the nuclear agreement and induce Iran to moderate its regional behavior. The rationale for such a change in U.S. policy would be the view that

Iran's sense of vulnerability to external threats and survival of the regime were a factor in why Iran undertook to develop nuclear weapons in the first place, and that a nuclear agreement could have positive effects on Iran's regional behavior.

One way to implement such a policy change in terms of the USAF posture would be to deemphasize capabilities and operations that the Iranians view as most threatening, without severely affecting overall U.S. capability. This could include scaling back some daily ISR and combat sorties. Taking these steps would only marginally reduce the overall threat the USAF poses to Iran while signaling a

Table 1: USAF Middle East Military Activities under a “Wait and See” Approach and Three Pathways to Change

Categories of USAF Middle East Activities	Maintain Current Posture in “Wait and See” Approach	Assuage Iran’s Sense of Vulnerability	Adjust to Global Demands and/or Budget Reductions	Respond to Improved Iranian Regional Behavior/US-Iran Relations
a. Permanent Presence/ Infrastructure/ Basing	Bases: Three main operating locations in Gulf: Ali al-Salem, Kuwait al-Udeid, Qatar (including CAOC) al-Dhafra, UAE	Bases: No change	Bases: Maintain infrastructure/ base operating support at Ali al-Salem and al-Dhafra to enable contingency response	Bases: Maintain infrastructure/ base operating support at Ali al-Salem and al-Dhafra to enable contingency response. Adjust support requirements toward non-Iran demands
	Prepositioning: Considerable WRM in Qatar and Oman	Prepositioning: No change	Prepositioning: Increase to enable contingency response	Prepositioning: Adjust for contingency response and non-Iranian requirements
	Access: Continuous access to Kuwait, Qatar, UAE; contingency access to Oman	Access: No change	Access: Ensure contingency access to Kuwait, UAE	Access: Ensure contingency access to Kuwait, UAE
b. Rotational Presence	Forces: 3 AEWs, 1 Expeditionary Mobility Squadron, including strike (bomber, fighter, including F-22, remotely piloted vehicles), tankers, ISR, airlift, Special Operations Forces, other support aircraft in Gulf; F-16s in Jordan	Forces: No change	Forces: Remove AEWs at Ali al-Salem and al-Dhafra	Forces: Remove AEWs
	Frequency: Most forces continuous; some varied based on situation in Gulf and Afghanistan	Frequency: Reduce deployments of combat aircraft, make them more transparent	Frequency: Reduce levels of continuously rotated forces, especially high-cost and low-density/high-demand assets	Frequency: Reduce deployments of combat and support aircraft

Table 1—Continued

Categories of USAF Middle East Activities	Maintain Current Posture in “Wait and See” Approach	Assuage Iran’s Sense of Vulnerability	Adjust to Global Demands and/or Budget Reductions	Respond to Improved Iranian Regional Behavior/US-Iran Relations
c. Security Cooperation, Including Exercises	Emphasis: Building Israeli and Arab partner capacity, interoperability, relationships, access, with focus on deterring/ countering Iran	Emphasis: No change	Emphasis: No change.	Emphasis: Add cooperation with Iran in multilateral settings
	Assistance/sales: Robust FMF with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq; robust FMS and defense commercial sales with GCC—advanced defensive and strike systems	Assistance/sales: No change	Assistance/sales: Design and reprioritize security assistance (including FMF) within reduced funding levels	Assistance/sales: Adjust new FMF/FMS cases and related technical training of all partners to non-Iran threats
	Engagement/training: Emphasis on technical training in United States and region (sales-related); multiple military-to-military events, building relationships; joint U.S.-UAE management of GAWC, IAMDC	Engagement/training: No change	Engagement/training: Reduce U.S. involvement in GAWC, IAMDC; rely on forces remaining in theater	Engagement/training: Undertake low-level multilateral engagement with Iran in areas of mutual interest (e.g., air safety)
	Exercises: Annual bilateral and multilateral exercises (Eager Lion, Jordan; Eagle Resolve, GCC; Falcon Air Meet, Jordan; Iron Falcon, location varies, four times a year; Red Flag, United States)	Exercises: Offer Iran observer status in some exercises (e.g., humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, consequence management)	Exercises: Reduce U.S. participation in regional exercises; plan less frequent bilateral and multilateral exercises; increase use of events and exercises in the United States as means of engaging with regional allies	Exercises: Plan multilateral and bilateral exercises with Iran in areas of mutual interest (accident prevention, disaster relief, consequence management, counterpiracy, counternarcotics, infectious diseases); focus combat-related exercises with partners on non-Iran scenarios

Table 1—Continued

Categories of USAF Middle East Activities	Maintain Current Posture in “Wait and See” Approach	Assuage Iran’s Sense of Vulnerability	Adjust to Global Demands and/or Budget Reductions	Respond to Improved Iranian Regional Behavior/US-Iran Relations
d. Planning/ Missions/ Operations	Operational Tempo: High	Operational Tempo: High-moderate	Operational Tempo: Moderate	Operational Tempo: Low
	Emphasis: Deterring Iranian aggression, preventing Iranian nuclear weapons; reassuring/defending allies, protecting U.S. forces	Emphasis: No change	Emphasis: Ensure protection of returning U.S. forces during contingency	Emphasis: Other regional requirements
	Planning: Prepare to defeat Iranian closure of Strait of Hormuz; degrade Iranian nuclear infrastructure to prevent nuclear weapons development; defend assets/partners after nonsanctioned allied strike; deter threats from terrorists	Planning: No change	Planning: Adjust to account for fewer in-place forces and greater reinforcement from outside theater	Planning: Redirect plans away from deterring/defeating Iran and toward other regional demands; conduct some planning with Iran (and U.S. partners) on common regional interests; maintain contingency plans to punish Iran for noncompliance and defeat Iranian closure of Strait
	Missions: Air superiority, suppression of enemy air defenses, strike, ISR, aerial refueling, airlift, special operations, medical evacuation, other	Missions: No change	Missions: No change	Missions: Greater emphasis on airlift, medical evacuation, agile combat support; some Overwatch ISR
	Operations: Signal U.S. resolve to Iran and U.S. partners during crisis	Operations: Reduce/eliminate most threatening ISR and combat sorties	Operations: Greater emphasis on long-range systems to carry out sorties near Iranian airspace	Operations: Multinational operations with Iran on common regional interests

If there are elements of USAF presence in the Gulf that are associated with operations in Afghanistan, the United States would have the issue of what signal it wishes to send as the drawdown in Afghanistan proceeds.

U.S. willingness to respond to Iran's forgoing nuclear weapons. To further assuage Iran's sense of vulnerability, there could be a reduction in the rotational peacetime posture. (See Tier 1 in Figure 1 and the third column of Table 1.)

If there are elements of USAF presence in the Gulf that are associated with operations in Afghanistan (e.g., strike, refueling, command and control), the United States would have the issue of what signal it wishes to send as the drawdown in Afghanistan proceeds. Keeping those elements could be a useful hedge against Iranian noncompliance, but bringing them back to the United States could show Iran that the United States will remove forces from the region when no longer required.

One U.S. challenge in undertaking such steps is whether Iran would understand the signal being sent, even though the United States has used its military capabilities in the region in the past to try to influence how Iran views the potential costs of developing nuclear weapons. These steps could be accompanied by changes in U.S. declaratory policy to reinforce the message.

Another challenge would be to keep U.S. partners reassured, as there would be no diminution in Iran's nonnuclear threat across the region (e.g., Iranian-backed Hezbollah would continue to be a concern to Israel and the United States, Iran's threat to Persian

Gulf shipping would remain). This could involve the United States undertaking some new types of security cooperation, including enhanced military-to-military interactions. Another step would be for the United States to make clear in its declaratory policy that it would retain a credible capability (and willingness) to respond to Iranian noncompliance and aggression, notwithstanding the changes in these military operations.

Pathway 2: Adjust to Competing Global Demands and/or Budget Reductions

A second pathway to change in U.S. policies toward Iran (and the U.S. military posture in the Middle East) could arise as a result of developments outside the region. Operational demands in the Pacific or Eastern Europe are already setting the stage for potential changes, with the expanding Russian threats, Chinese bellicosity with regard to the Senkaku Islands, and the instabilities associated with what is happening in North Korea. Given airpower flexibility and U.S. reliance on air assets as a "swing" force, the USAF could become the force of choice to reduce its rotating presence and frequency of other activities.

In addition, U.S. defense budget contraction and resulting concerns about maintaining military readiness already are bringing into question the ability of the United States to sustain its overseas military posture and tempo of operations. Without relief from the budget sequester, reductions in the U.S. military posture in the Middle East could be necessary.

The two different motivations for change in this pathway are nevertheless mutually reinforcing. Budget cuts that reduce U.S. force structure would increase pressure to draw forces (especially high-demand/low-density forces) from other theaters when crisis or con-

flict ensues. Crises in other theaters that increase overall demand—even temporarily—for military forces will put pressure on budgets and readiness and negatively affect U.S. posture in the Middle East even if those forces were not needed for those extra-theater crises.

In this pathway, the characteristics of the changes in presence and activities would be largely driven by the nature of the other competing regional demands or the reduction in the readiness (or operations and maintenance) budgets (depicted in the fourth column of Table 1). The primary challenge would be to find means not to undercut the U.S. goals vis-à-vis Iran (and specifically implementation of the nuclear agreement) and to sustain reassurance of U.S. partners—especially in this case, where Iran’s post-agreement relationship with the United States and its regional partners remains fundamentally adversarial.

To illustrate what might be the implications of such changes for the USAF military posture, we reference a posture defined in previous RAND analysis that involved cost reductions and was “intended to represent the minimum forward military presence that the United States would need to remain a globally responsive military power.”¹⁰ In terms of presence in the Middle East, the USAF would remove two AEWs but keep their facilities in Kuwait and UAE as “warm” bases that retain essential supporting units so forces could return quickly if necessary. The primary USAF presence would be the 379th AEW stationed at al-Udeid Air Base. The levels of continuously rotating forces would be consolidated there and reduced, as would U.S. participation in regional exercises. The missions described in Figure 1 would not change, though the ways in which these could be undertaken would likely change.

Keeping up the sales flow of advanced weapon systems could be critical to maintaining the support of partners, and could be done

by reprioritizing security assistance in their favor. A final challenge lies in political perception. From an operational perspective, basing an AEW in Qatar versus basing in the UAE or Kuwait represents little difference, but this choice would be significant from a political perspective. The current tension in the GCC between Qatar on the one hand and the UAE (and Saudi Arabia in particular) on the other heightens the risk that consolidating AFCENT presence in Qatar would be seen as playing favorites within the GCC. This is a particularly sensitive issue given Qatar’s perceived association with a pro-Muslim Brotherhood agenda in juxtaposition with the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s perceived association with an anti-Muslim Brotherhood agenda. The United States would need to be careful that basing options driven by other considerations were not misinterpreted within the region as an endorsement of a particular agenda.

Pathway 3: Respond to Iran’s Moderation in Regional Behavior

A third pathway to change in U.S. policies toward Iran could arise as a result of a moderation in Iran’s behavior in the region, with the possibility that the United States would reduce its military posture and activities in response to the reduction in the Iranian threat. There are different ways in which Iran could moderate its behavior: It could lessen its support to allied terrorist groups and networks in the region or begin to cooperate with the United States in areas of common interest—for example, in Afghanistan; in Iraq in response to ISIL; or in the areas of maritime safety, consequence management, humanitarian assistance, counterpiracy, and counter-narcotics. (These are the Tier 3 missions shown in Figure 1 that can reinforce relations rather than create tensions with Iran, also depicted in the fifth column of Table 1.)

A U.S. response to such a moderation in Iran's behavior could take many forms and would need to be sequenced in response to Iranian actions. It could start with reductions in the deployments of the most advanced combat systems and introduction of more sporadic rotations, while at the same time making the rotations more transparent; e.g., giving Iran advance notification. Reductions in the rotating AEWs could be undertaken, along with a shift in the characteristics of the bases to support requirements unrelated to Iran. The United States could also reduce the regularity of multinational exercises directed at Iran and begin bilateral exercises with Iran in areas where common interests were emerging. Shifts would also then also occur in the Tier 1 and Tier 2 missions in Figure 1.

Keeping U.S. partners reassured in this pathway could require less in terms of U.S. military activities, given that the pathway would involve a moderation of Iran's regional threat. Particularly important would be Iran's willingness to engage Gulf partners over territorial issues, such as its dispute with the UAE over Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, and to temper its opposition to Israel. Such a change in the environment could be reinforced by refocusing security cooperation on non-Iranian threats. And the United States could encourage confidence-building among its regional partners, particularly in the Gulf, through multilateral dialogues involving Iran on areas of mutual concern.

The Way Ahead

The United States will face a complex set of policy issues and trade-offs in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement with Iran. This

is the case not only because Iran's intentions and actions to forgo a nuclear weapon will change the security environment in the region, but also because of the new, complex, and evolving threat posed by ISIL.

The uncertainties associated with post-agreement Iranian behavior (in implementing the agreement and in its regional behavior), as well as the political and military situation across the Middle East, argue for a "wait and see" approach, especially in the U.S. regional military posture.

However, these uncertainties should not immobilize U.S. policymakers. While there will always be risks associated with change, there can also be opportunities. In the aftermath of a nuclear agreement with Iran, policymakers need to be open to changes in U.S. policies resulting from demonstrable Iranian actions in complying with the agreement and in its behavior in the region. Policymakers also must be prepared to react in the event that resources need to shift from the Middle East to other parts of the world.

The high-level policy decisions on this issue will be made at the national level, but the USAF should see itself as having a role, first, in informing senior-level policy discussions as to how the USAF military posture in the region could be designed in support of alternative U.S. policies toward Iran. Second, the USAF will need to understand and communicate the resource and readiness implications of these alternatives to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff leadership. This analysis provides a framework in which the USAF can play this role in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement with Iran.

Notes

¹ Dalia Dassa Kaye and Jeffrey Martini, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Regional Responses to a Final Nuclear Agreement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-122-RC, 2014. As of November 5, 2014: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE122.html>; Alireza Nader, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-124-RC, 2014. As of November 5, 2014: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE124.html>; Lynn E. Davis, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: U.S. Policies of Hedging and Engaging*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-125-RC, 2014. As of November 5, 2014: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE125.html>; Jeffrey M. Kaplow and Rebecca Davis Gibbons, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Implications for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-135-RC, 2015. As of January 5, 2015: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE135.html>; and Larry Hanauer, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Congress's Role in Implementing a Nuclear Agreement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-139-RC, 2015. As of January 5, 2015: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE139.html>.

This Perspective also drew from a large body of previous RAND research on Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, including Alireza Nader, *Iran After the Bomb: How Would a Nuclear-Armed Tehran Behave?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-310, 2013. As of November 5, 2014: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR310.html; James Dobbins, Alireza Nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Frederic M. Wehrey, *Coping With a Nuclearizing Iran*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1154-SRF, 2011. As of November 5, 2014: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1154.html>; and Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye, James T. Quinlivan, and Paul S. Steinberg, *Iran's Nuclear Future: Critical U.S. Policy Choices*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1087-AF, 2011. As of November 5, 2014: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1087.html>

² These assets include: military forces rotationally deployed and permanently garrisoned; basing facilities and supporting infrastructure; and the agreements that enable the United States to have an overseas military presence.

³ Davis, 2014, p. 6.

⁴ The description of the current USAF posture is drawn from U.S. Senate, "The Gulf Security Architecture: Partnership With the Gulf Cooperation Council," Washington, D.C.: Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Government Printing Office, June 19, 2012; Defense Manpower Data Center, "Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Region/Country (Updated Quarterly)," June 30, 2014. As of July 28, 2014: https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp; Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-201-OSD, 2013. As of November 5, 2014: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR201.html; U.S. Air Forces Central Command, "Fact Sheet," April 8, 2013, As of August 12, 2014: <http://www.afcent.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/140/Article/217800/us-air-forces-central-command.aspx>; Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, "Middle East Regional Policy and Bilateral and Multilateral Relationships," testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., February 11, 2014. Note that we do not include personnel in the table, given that the numbers of those permanently stationed in the Middle East is small and any changes would be those associated with changes in the presence and activities.

⁵ Personnel numbers derived from the Defense Manpower Data Center. This includes 2,000 USAF personnel in Kuwait associated with Operations Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) and New Dawn (Iraq).

⁶ Training at the GAWC reportedly facilitated Emirati deployment of six F-16 Block 60 and six Mirage 2000 aircraft to Operation Unified Protector in Libya.

⁷ See, for example, "Iran Renews Hormuz Closure Threats," *Reuters*, July 16, 2012.

⁸ For an account of an encounter between an F-22 and an Iranian F-4 that appeared to be on an intercept course with an MQ-1 Predator in international airspace off Iran's coast, see Matthew Cox, "Welsh: F-22 Flew to Drone's Rescue Off Iran Coast," *Military.com*, September 17, 2013. As of September 2, 2014: <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2013/09/17/welsh-f22-flew-to-drones-rescue-off-iran-coast.html>

⁹While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider potential post-agreement changes in the postures and activities of other services in the region, it is important to note that changes in the USAF posture would have to be considered in terms of the impact they might have on joint operations (for example, removing C-130s from Kuwait would affect operations of U.S. ground forces there, or removing the tankers from Al-Dhafra would severely limit the range of U.S. Navy carrier operations). Moreover, posture changes in the other service assets could also support the goals in each of the pathways.

¹⁰Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-201-OSD, 2013, pp. 238, 243. As of November 5, 2014: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR201.html

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About This Perspective

One of a series of RAND Perspectives on what the Middle East and U.S. policy might look like in the “the days after a deal” (a final nuclear agreement) with Iran, this Perspective examines the implications of a potential deal for the U.S. military posture and activities in the Middle East, with a focus on the U.S. Air Force. Other titles in the series include Dalia Dassa Kaye and Jeffrey Martini, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Regional Responses to a Final Nuclear Agreement*, PE-122-RC, 2014; Alireza Nader, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*, PE-124-RC, 2014; Lynn E. Davis, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: U.S. Policies of Hedging and Engaging*, PE-125-RC, 2014; Jeffrey M. Kaplow and Rebecca Davis Gibbons, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Implications for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime*, PE-135-RC, 2014; and Larry Hanauer, *The Days After a Deal with Iran: Congress’s Role in Implementing a Nuclear Agreement*, PE-139-RC, 2014.

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